

Review by researcher calls for pill testing to be part of Australia's Drug Strategy

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On-site testing of 'party drug' pills could reduce the harms caused by drug use and potentially save lives, according to an independent review of Australia's National Drug Strategy, published in the open access *Harm Reduction Journal*.

Dr Andrew Groves at Deakin University, Australia, examines evidence in support of [pill](#) testing to reduce fatalities caused by 'party drugs' such as ecstasy and methamphetamines, at festivals, clubs and raves. Pill testing involves party-goers having a sample of their drugs tested on-site by scientists and [drug](#) experts. They then receive information about what is in their drug, with the option of keeping the drug or anonymously handing it over.

Dr Andrew Groves, corresponding author, said: "The most surprising finding of our research is that the evidence has clearly identified the inadequacy of existing punitive, zero tolerance strategies across several countries, and yet such policies often remain embedded in government legislative action. While we still need further evaluation of how best to implement pill testing and other harm reduction initiatives, the evidence suggests that they are useful and there is widespread support from the community and practitioners in the field. The debate must be about harm, rather than criminality."

In the review, the author evaluated examples of drug policies around the world, including Portugal, where the government has implemented pill testing, as part of much broader policy reforms including the

decriminalisation of the possession of drugs. This led to drug use being viewed as a public health concern, rather than a criminal issue and reduced problematic drug use and its related harms.

The researcher analysed another example of pill testing: Austria's chEckiT project. In this project, users were presented information on the quality or purity of their drug. If presented with a negative result, two-thirds of users reported that they would not consume their drugs and would also warn friends against taking them. A similar project in the Netherlands found that pill testing did not increase the use of party drugs, which is often perceived as a risk of such initiatives.

Dr Groves said: "Although considered radical at the time, these measures have been effective in reducing the harms associated with illicit drug use, and problems for drug users and the wider community. The examples evaluated in this study support the idea that party-drug use requires pragmatic, evidence-based initiatives, such as pill testing, rather than criminal justice responses."

In data from recent literature, the author found evidence of increased consumption of more potent forms of 'party drugs' such as MDMA and 'ice'. The author suggested that, in addition to the surveillance and monitoring efforts carried out under the current National Drug Strategy in Australia, pill testing could provide further data on the quality and content of the drugs people use and that it could be useful for monitoring changes in the drug market. Pill testing data could provide more accurate information than current techniques, such as wastewater analysis, which could inform users on how to reduce drug-related harms and help authorities to influence the drug market. For example, the Netherlands' Drug Information and Monitoring System, which used data from pill testing to accurately identify drug content, purity and potency, informed national warning campaigns, which has pushed dangerous, low-quality substances out of the market.

Dr Groves said: "We are calling for further collaboration between law enforcement and healthcare providers to ensure that they take appropriate action to reduce the harm caused by drugs. It is important to focus on prevention, public awareness campaigns and education to shift cultural attitudes, so that use of party drugs is identified as a [public health](#) issue rather than a criminal one."

The author stressed that although pill testing cannot eliminate the harms of drug use, and cannot be used as a stand-alone solution, it could be a vital part of wider harm reduction strategy. The author noted that there is a need to ensure evidence-based approaches that are targeted, appropriate and cost-effective, and that will lead to reduced harms associated with illicit drugs.

More information: Andrew Groves, 'Worth the test?' Pragmatism, pill testing and drug policy in Australia, *Harm Reduction Journal* (2018).
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